

SUMMARY OF STATEMENT NO. 51

SUMMARIES / STATUS

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ACCOUNTING AND FINANCIAL REPORTING FOR INTANGIBLE ASSETS

(ISSUED 06/07)

Governments possess many different types of assets that may be considered intangible assets, including easements, water rights, timber rights, patents, trademarks, and computer software. Intangible assets, and more specifically easements, are referred to in the description of capital assets in Statement No. 34, *Basic Financial Statements—and Management's Discussion and Analysis—for State and Local Governments*. This reference has created questions as to whether and when intangible assets should be considered capital assets for financial reporting purposes. An absence of sufficiently specific authoritative guidance that addresses these questions has resulted in inconsistencies in the accounting and financial reporting of intangible assets among state and local governments, particularly in the areas of recognition, initial measurement, and amortization. The objective of this Statement is to establish accounting and financial reporting requirements for intangible assets to reduce these inconsistencies, thereby enhancing the comparability of the accounting and financial reporting of such assets among state and local governments.

This Statement requires that all intangible assets not specifically excluded by its scope provisions be classified as capital assets. Accordingly, existing authoritative guidance related to the accounting and financial reporting for capital assets should be applied to these intangible assets, as applicable. This Statement also provides authoritative guidance that specifically addresses the nature of these intangible assets. Such guidance should be applied in addition to the existing authoritative guidance for capital assets.

The guidance specific to intangible assets referred to above includes guidance on recognition. This Statement requires that an intangible asset be recognized in the statement of net assets only if it is considered identifiable. Additionally, this Statement establishes a specified-conditions approach to recognizing intangible assets that are internally generated. Effectively, outlays associated with the development of such assets should not begin to be capitalized until certain criteria are met. Outlays incurred prior to meeting these criteria should be expensed as incurred. This Statement also provides guidance on recognizing internally generated computer software as an intangible asset. This guidance serves as an application of the specified-conditions approach described above to the development cycle of computer software.

This Statement also establishes guidance specific to intangible assets related to amortization. This Statement provides guidance on determining the useful life of intangible assets when the length of their life is limited by contractual or legal provisions. If there are no factors that limit the useful life of an intangible asset, the Statement provides that the intangible asset be considered to have an indefinite useful life. Intangible assets with indefinite useful lives should not be amortized unless their useful life is subsequently determined to no longer be indefinite due to a change in circumstances.

The requirements of this Statement are effective for financial statements for periods beginning after June 15, 2009. The provisions of this Statement generally are required to be applied retroactively. For governments that were classified as phase 1 or phase 2 governments for the purpose of implementing Statement 34, retroactive reporting is required for intangible assets acquired in fiscal years ending after June 30, 1980, except for those considered to have indefinite useful lives as of the effective date of this Statement and those that would be considered internally generated. Retroactive reporting of these

intangible assets by phase 3 governments is encouraged but not required. Retroactive reporting is not required but is permitted for intangible assets considered to have indefinite useful lives as of the effective date of this Statement and those considered to be internally generated.

How the Changes in This Statement Improve Financial Reporting

The requirements in this Statement improve financial reporting by reducing inconsistencies that have developed in accounting and financial reporting for intangible assets. These inconsistencies will be reduced through the clarification that intangible assets subject to the provisions of this Statement should be classified as capital assets, and through the establishment of new authoritative guidance that addresses issues specific to these intangible assets given their nature (for example, recognition provisions for internally generated intangible assets, including computer software). This Statement also fosters greater comparability among state and local government financial statements and results in a more faithful representation of the service capacity of intangible assets—and therefore the financial position of governments—and of the periodic cost associated with the usage of such service capacity in governmental financial statements.

Unless otherwise specified, pronouncements of the GASB apply to financial reports of all state and local governmental entities, including general purpose governments; public benefit corporations and authorities; public employee retirement systems; and public utilities, hospitals and other healthcare providers, and colleges and universities. Paragraphs 2 and 3 discuss the applicability of this Statement.